The role of the non-human in relations of care: Baby Things

Abstract

In this paper we argue that the non-human plays a vital role within networks of care. We do this through a consideration of the forms of work done by baby things in the giving and receiving of young-child care. We extend existing understandings of human-nonhuman relations by arguing that beyond the work of warming babies' bodies and providing comfort, baby things function within care assemblages as both a means and a metric of parental care. Within the consumption literature, the work of home provisioning (typically undertaken by mothers) has been cast as an expression of love for others. We build on this by exploring the forms of participation and "caring capacities" of matter itself – objects such as blankets, soft-toys and pacifiers- in the caring-for of babies and young children. We attend to the flows and stoppages of baby things across networks of early childhood caregiving to consider what these patterns of movement suggest about how such artefacts participate within relations of care, and how they are used as a means to reflect on the care practices of others. Analysis is based on 30 interviews with mothers and ethnographic and survey work at 14 children's clothing exchanges in different parts of England and Scotland. Drawing on scholarship from the New Materialism as well as Mary Douglas's conceptual work on dirt and cleanliness,[1] we advance conceptual work within and beyond Cultural Geography by arguing that analytical attention to the role of the more than human leads to richer and more nuanced understandings of how care relations work.

Keywords: assemblages of care, the non-human, parenting, vibrant matter, carework, baby things, non-human caring

Introduction

The material turn within (and beyond) Cultural Geography is now well established[2]. This analysis builds on existing work by extending our understanding of how matter participates in carework. To date the question of materiality has been considered in relation to carework principally through the analysis of household provisioning as an expression of love and devotion (typically a mother's love for other members of the family)[3]. This paper extends understanding about the socio-material nature of care assemblages through an analysis of the role of "baby things" in the work of young-child caring. We do this by exploring the journeys baby things take (or do not take) after their first user, querying why some items move onwards and others do not. We extend existing understandings of human-nonhuman relations by arguing that beyond the work of warming babies' bodies and providing comfort, baby things function within care assemblages as both a means and a metric of parental care.

Our analysis draws on an empirical base of interviews with 30 mothers and ethnographic observations at 14 used children's clothing sales in different parts of England and Scotland in 2013, as well as our own experiences of motherhood and second-hand consumption. We attend to the flows and stoppages of baby things across networks of early childhood caregiving to consider both what these patterns of movement suggest about how such artefacts participate within relations of care, and how these artefacts are used to reflect on the care practices of others. We draw on scholarship from the New Materialism as well as Mary Douglas's conceptual work on dirt and cleanliness.[4] We advance conceptual work within and beyond Cultural Geography by arguing that analytical attention to the role of the more than human leads to richer and more nuanced understandings of how care relations work.

Our paper has three parts. First we situate this exploration in relation to the relevant literatures to which it contributes, then we outline the study on which the research is based. We then turn to our empirical contribution, analysing the role of baby things within networks of early childhood care. In outlining the key literature on which our own study builds we first highlight work that has begun to illuminate the socio-material nature of everyday practice and care assemblages, with an attendant focus on motherly co-consumption. We then introduce "dirt" as a socially constructed concept and highlight the manner in which the philosophy of New Materialisms shines a light on the materiality of everyday life. We then discuss our findings in three inter-linked themes: wear and dirt; boundary-maintenance; and assemblages of good mothering. Finally, we draw conclusions in the hope that others will continue to explore the role of the non-human in relations of care in different contexts.

Theorising matter within assemblages of care: mothering co-consumption, the politics of "dirt" and the role of the non-human in world-making

This paper draws on and extends scholarship on carework, parenting, mothering, the politics of materiality and second-handedness. The following section briefly outlines the contribution this work makes to each of these fields. Care and caring-work have attracted a significant amount of attention from Social, Cultural and Feminist Geographers (among others) over the last twenty years[5]. As a comprehensive engagement with these literatures is beyond the scope of this paper, we will focus instead on the aspects of each that bear most directly on our research theme, ie. the role of matter within relations of care. This scholarship has taken conceptual inspiration from various strands of post-humanist philosophy to highlight the myriad ways human action is interwoven with that of non-humans in the field of care. Buser [6] has explored the connections between materiality and care in the maintenance of urban infrastructure; DeLyser and Greenstein [7] in the context of the restoration of vintage motorcycles; and Geohegan and Hess[8] in the context of the care of museum objects. This work has shown how practices of repair and mending of urban water infrastructure function as a form of (hidden) carework[9]; how the restoration of cared-for objects can serve as means of expressing love for both matter and other humans[10]; and how museum curation can evoke object-love by caring for precious objects over time[11]. We draw from this scholarship the idea that caring-work is not an exclusively human practice, but rather one that is actualised through socio-material assemblages.

Relatedly, scholarship on the geographies of parenthood, motherhood, and fatherhood have also flourished over the last twenty-odd years[12]. This work has encompassed topics ranging from the politics of maternal embodiment[13], the way parenthood has become increasingly about managing (perceived) risk[14], and how motherhood relates to class, amongst other themes[15]. As an example, and to focus on the aspect of this scholarship relating most closely to the themes herein, we would particularly like to highlight work exploring how the intensities, forces and capacities of prams and mass transit systems inter-relate with mothers' mobility in London[16] and the role of the family car in parenting practice.[17] In our paper, we build on analyses that focus on the role of the more than human in achieving *parental* mobility to explore the movements of baby things themselves after one family is finished using them.

In this sense we add directly to the work of Social Psychologist Lisa Baraitser who has also called for greater attention to be paid to the "mutually constuitive relationships between human and non-human" that occur in the course of parenting[18]. Baraitser has explored the way matter (like prams) encumber mothers[19] and argues that matter serves to stabilize human relationships in the context of parenting[20]. We take this insight on board and take this line

of inquiry forward by exploring the role of matter as both a means and a metric of care within parenting assemblages.[21]

Within the parenting literature, matter is typically considered in terms of the role it plays in the establishment of parental identity. For example, the purchase of prams has been analysed in the context of the process by which women transition to mothers over the course of pregnancy and new parenthood[22]. This harmonises with consumption literature which has argued that decisions about what to buy for one's baby are wrapped up with the formation of maternal identity[23], and that the work of material provisioning can be considered an act of love and selfless devotion[24]. Daniel Cook identifies this complex practice as "co-consumption"; as a mother negotiates her own fears and desires with the needs of the infant[25]. While this work highlights the significance of matter in the construction and maintenance of both identities and relationships, we want to shift this focus from maternal identities to that of the socio-material nature of care assemblages of which mothers are a part (along with babies, partners, families, matter, affects, discourses and policies about parenting, built-form, etc).

The "matter" we focus on in this paper are second-hand (used/pre-loved) baby things (toys, clothes, and equipment). As scholarship has noted, the informal economy of second-hand childrenswear is one of reciprocity and resourcefulness; part of a broader "moral economy" of mothering[26]. Second-hand economies in general are sites both of disposal and consumption, evidence of the social life of things as they return to an (informal) retail space upon ending their useful life with a first owner. These economies show that material disposal is not a passive or concluding practice but rather a continuous process of movement and transformation[27].

One of our key conceptual frames in analysing the role of baby things within assemblages of care is the work of Mary Douglas advanced in her foundational text *Purity and Danger*. This work highlights how understandings of "dirt" are not solely about maintaining a certain standard of hygiene but also feed into symbolic systems relating to the maintenance of order and purity. As Douglas argues, what counts as "dirt" is always socially constructed, never existing outside a classification system naming it as such[28]. Moreover, dirt implies prior cleanliness; spaces or beings which are to be kept pure; and a binary relationship between that which is to be kept pure on the one hand, and forces of defilement on the other[29].

Drawing on this, we approach social life as a relational practice achieved through engagements with human and non-human others. This perspective is informed by a nexus of theoretical work that has come to the fore over the last decade on human/more than

human relations captured loosely under the banner of the New Materialism.[30] Informed by post-humanist philosophy and Deleuzo-Guattarian theory, the New Materialism seeks to unseat the human subject as the primary ontological focus by attending to the forces, intensities and capacities of matter in the work of world-making. By highlighting what Jane Bennett[31] terms matter's "self-directing activeness" or matter's ability to act on the world, this body of work has drawn our attention to the ways different parts of the world intra-act and co-make each other. Building on this, it advances the view that "things" are not ontologically prior but are instead constituted through their engagements/relations with other things[32]. As well as recognising matter's dynamic and relational nature, the New Materialism also seeks to draw attention to the social and political affects of both this dynamism as well as of matters' continual, ongoing degradation[33].

Building on key traditions in feminist scholarship, the New Materialism is likewise attuned to questions of embodiment and bodily practice. In line with this attunement, the New Materialism recognises the importance of historically and culturally mediated embodied power relations and forms of classification that territorialise bodies and social experiences. In turn, it also seeks to understand how such power relations can become sedimented into systems of discrimination and inequality, highlighting the role of the non-human within these processes.

The New Materialism has been taken up by scholars of various stripe within Cultural Geography in recent years[34]. Informed by a concern with the Anthropocene, this body of scholarship has addressed the politics of vibrant matter and inter-relations with the more than human principally through the concept of naturecultures[35] and through investigations of "lively" urban form[36]. Building on this, we explore the potential of the New Materialism for understanding assemblages of care. To do this, we figure parenting as an assemblage composed of both human and nonhuman parts[37].

Based on the work of Deleuze and Guittari we employ the concept of the assemblage as a means to conceptualise the way different things (or parts of things) come together to achieve something. To illustrate this concept, Deleuze and Guattari offer examples including the way orchids and wasps collaborate to pollinate plants[38], and the way babies, mothers and breasts collaborate to achieve breastfeeding[39]. The concept of the assemblage works well as a means to unseat the centrality of human agency by drawing attention to the multiple forms of agentic forces (both human and nonhuman) involved in any action. Drawing on Karen Barad we use the concept of the assemblage to attend to the ways different agencies come together to make different parts of the world intelligible to and useful for each other[40]. We

suggest that within parenting assemblages babies and parents come together with other kin, friends, health professionals, discourses of 'good' and "bad" parenting, and myriad forms of matter to achieve care (and emotional, and affective) relations. Drawing on the New Materialism and assemblage theory, we attend to the ways bodies and matter relate to one another within relations of early childhood care as a way to explore how attending to the more than human within these assemblages can deepen our understanding of carework as a practice. Having traced out the relevant literature and conceptual frames on which we draw, we will now provide a brief outline of the study on which our analysis is based.

Study and background

Empirically this work draws on an ethnographic study of 14 used-children's clothing and equipment sales in different parts of England and Scotland in 2013 including interviews with 30 mothers and our own auto-ethnographic experiences of carework. The decision to focus on second-hand baby things was made in the context of the increasing role of second-cycle consumption in the UK retail landscape[41]. Second-cycle consumption makes particular sense for new parents, who often find themselves both needing to acquire a significant amount of new kinds of things for their home in the anticipation of a first baby, and also needing to acquire clothes, toys and equipment for a baby whose body and needs change quickly over a short period of time[42]. Our choice to focus on second-hand consumption was also motivated by the way this form of provisioning serves as a means to "care for objects" that still have life in them, as well as "care for world" in terms of reducing carbon-footprints. Drawing on New Materialism we can also say that the passing-along of baby things enables certain objects to carry on performing functions which could be understood as caring (for example enabling mittens to warm additional hands, and cuddly toys to give more comfort). baby things

Despite increasing interest in second-cycle, it is also worth pointing out that people have different thresholds or sensitivities around participating in such sharing economies. For some, getting second-hand from a known/loved person (like a sister or friend) is acceptable because this builds on an already-existing connection to a known other[43]. Yet wherever parents get their baby things from, when items are no longer of use decisions need to be made about what to do with them. For many mothers the limit on storage space within the typical British home translates into the need to keep things moving through the system to known, barely-known and sometimes unknown others in order to claw back precious living space. In this sense the simple amount of space a given item takes up can be a reason to let it flow out of one home (and caring assemblage) and into another. These different pressures result in clothing and other items going on journeys "up and down the street" as one

participant told us. At the same time, things carry with them traces of their role in previous caring relations, and these traces stand as sensory and affective reminders of that object's role within previous relations of care.

The sales accessed for this study were run by volunteers associated with a national parenting charity as a service for parents to buy and sell children's goods in an informal setting such as a school or community hall. One of the authors conducted participant observation at the sales as a volunteer and utilised this involvement to access and recruit interviewees. Interviewees were accessed through three sale locations chosen for their relative geographic and socio-economic diversity. One sale was situated in the suburbs of a large, multicultural, Midlands city; another (attended twice in twelve months), in a small, affluent city in the South East; and a third in a South Coast town recognised for higher than average levels of deprivation than the surrounding county. Participant observation was conducted at a further ten sales across England and Scotland selected by a stratified random sampling method according to geographic region. Interviews were semi-structured and largely conducted in participant's homes. Not only was this deemed convenient for participants, but home interviews also enabled easy access to the kinds of material things discussed during these interviews. Interviewees were asked about their experiences of attending the sale, their consumption of (specifically second-hand) baby things, and what they do with these things in everyday practice. Mothers were interviewed over fathers because mothers continue to do a higher proportion of domestic labour and childcare in the home[44]. In addition, initial observations found that it was mothers who by and large attended the sales and managed the purchasing, sorting, cleaning and passing-on of baby things.

All interviewees were white, heterosexual and all were native-born British apart from one. Interviewees varied in age group from 20-24 years to 40+ with most being between 30-34 years. Two (both in their twenties) were first time expectant mothers, the others all being mothers to one or two children up to the age of ten. Two thirds were educated to degree level, with six holding postgraduate qualifications. This means that the sample were nearly twice as well educated as the general working age population in the UK where 38% are graduates[45]. Most were either married or co-habiting, one was divorced and living alone, another was in a relationship but living alone.

Although most mothers in our study said they bought second-hand as a way to be "thrifty" and make household budgets stretch further, these were not by and large "excluded"[46] consumers forced to buy second-hand for financial reasons. Instead, buying "pre-loved" things served as a way to get "second sets" of clothing to keep at a grandparents' or

childminder's house, while for some it was also an ethical choice linked to trying to take a lower-consumption approach to parenting[47]. Class matters to parental consumption practice[48] and it is safe to say that the interviewees assessed for this study were a middle-class group.

Interview transcripts were analysed using standard techniques of interpretative coding to draw out key themes[49]. These interpretative themes were developed in light of the participant observation conducted by one of the authors, and in reflecting on our own experiences of caring-work. Our methodological approach is based on the view that knowledge production is always a collaborative process of knowledge co-construction (in this case a collaboration between ourselves as researchers, the many research subjects who contributed to this project, and for that matter the material infrastructure of our writing and researching practice)[50]. We see such analysis as a reflexive process of teasing out our own understanding of what the data means; a process strengthened by our differing standpoints to the data. One of us is a mother of a school-age child and so has participated in second-hand consumption (and production) of baby things first-hand. One of us not a mother but has a background in research on second-hand consumption, including of baby things in particular.

Let us now turn to consider some of the different kinds of marks, traces and hauntings baby things can carry with them, and how those traces shape how items flow (or do not flow) between different assemblages of care. The following section is presented through three themes: wear and dirt; boundary-maintenance; and assemblages of "good" mothering.

The nonhuman in relations of care: baby things

Wear and dirt

In this section we explore the socio-material nature of infant care assemblages. We discuss some of the ways study participants talked about second-hand baby things, calling attention to themes of dirt, contamination, and boundary-maintenance. Based on this data we argue that baby things act as both a means and a metric of parental care, and that this is signalled through different kinds of responses to different kinds of "wear". On the one hand mothers were keen to shield their children from items they viewed as contaminating. In this sense the avoidance of items perceived as dirty or soiled functioned as a metric of (good) care (as one might expect). Consider the following excerpts from our interviews:

> Participant: I didn't buy the Moses basket second-hand. I wanted that new, and I think it's just because you can take the fabric off and wash it which is what we've done now to put hers away, but its wicker as well and, it sounds a bit…well I've got

> cats but my cats don't go near her bedding but other people's cats maybe can. Or people who smoke, so because it was mostly material I just thought I didn't want to buy that second-hand. That one I was adamant that we were buying that, we bought that new. So I think bedding was one of the few things I was a bit (unsure about buying second-hand).
>
> Participant: I wouldn't buy soft toys, I wouldn't buy things like vests, like underwear type clothes. I'd rather have things that you can wipe down with antibacterial wipes or wash, you know. . . I know you could wash underwear but still, I don't know, I find that a bit gross.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think it's a bit gross?
>
> Participant: Well, just because it could have been soiled, they are personal items. And with soft toys often end up looking a bit manky after a while.
>
> Interviewer: Is there anything you wouldn't buy second-hand for your child?
>
> Participant: Probably more soft toys I imagine, teddies and that, just because they're a little less easy to clean.

The above quotes, from three different mothers, evidence a common theme of classifying intimate textiles as objects which participants felt uncomfortable acquiring second-hand, or at least second-hand from an unknown source (more dispensation may be given to hand-me-downs from a relative for example). Each of these mothers acknowledged that textiles can be washed; yet there persisted a concern that these items remained unclean because they were personal items that had been "soiled" or "contaminated" by others' domestic practices. There seems to be something about the material composition of textiles that suggests they cannot be wiped clean as readily as solid items can. Such intimate textiles carry an affective harbouring of dirt and a distant unknown "other" that hints to previous relations of care and acts as a threat to future care. Teethers and bottles were other objects which likewise attracted a higher degree of concern amongst potential second-hand buyers:

> Participant: bottles I don't think I'd buy second-hand. As long as things are nice and you can wash it you can make it good again, but I don't really feel like the bottles perhaps would be a bit personal, I'd rather just have them new
>
> Participant: Teethers and things they've been chewed and have tooth marks on them. That's revolting.

The way the matter of the teether had changed shape ("tooth marks") in this case in response to engagements with another baby's teeth was evidence of the role this object had played in a previous care relation. Even though this item could be sterilised, its material traces and forms of degradation elicited a visceral reaction of "revolt". As Douglas notes: "some objects stay impure and can be conductors of impurity even after contact"[51]. The care relation in which this object had participated –evidenced by teeth marks—was deemed as too intimate to take-up in a subsequent care network. Unpurchased, this object became a material boundary-marker to the limits of this participant's care network. After Douglas, we suggest that in identiyfing items too dirty or contaminated/contaminating to use, each of the above passages tacitly invokes the "purity" of a baby's body that is not to be sullied by contact with such items. In this formulation it is a marker of (good) care not to allow such (contaminating) items into the home/ one's care assemblage.

Yet our data suggests that this was not the only thing going on in terms of the way second-hand goods were perceived, taken up (or not taken up) within care assemblages. While some forms of "dirt" in second-cycle baby things were troubling, wear was also recognised as an unavoidable consequence of use. While some second-hand baby things were shunned for their traces, evidence of participation in previous care relations was not always vilified, and sometimes was even celebrated. For example, in the case of less intimate clothing like boots, traces of use sometimes instilled confidence in potential buyers that an item was fit-for-purpose. As one participant put it: "If it's been used it's almost like… someone else is saying 'this is good... this has worked". In such cases certain kinds of material degradation can help an item flow onwards to a new care assemblage, enabling it to continue to give service.

Relatedly, some sellers reported feeling a sense of responsibility to allow items that had been useful to them to go on and continue to be useful to others. This correlates with Gregson and Crewe's[52] finding that childrens' things are well-suited to second-hand economies because they are little-used by first-owners before children outgrow them, and many parents are keen that these material goods, and the resources and energy that went into producing them, do not "go to waste", as one participant told us.

In other words, while keeping items perceived as dirty away from the "pure" body of the child (after Douglas) was certainly one motivation amongst mothers engaging in second-cycle consumption, this was not the only way in which wear related to constructions of "good caring". In contrast to earlier examples, some participants reported specifically liking evidence of second-hand baby things having received certain kinds of care, such as a freshly-laundered smell or evidence of ironing. Consider the following exchange:

> Interviewer: Do you wash items when you get them home?
>
> Participant: [laughs] No, no. I bring them into this room and unpack the bags and just put them away. You can tell that they're all clean and ironed, they'll never be ironed again after that. You can tell that they are clean because they smell of the detergents that have been used..(they) smell much cleaner than our normal stuff and I don't iron so… I'll keep that washed and ironed smell as long as possible.

Here we have a contrasting view from that of fabric as being "too open" to the world or a vector of contamination, to one in which certain textiles are viewed instead as almost vectors of hygiene. At the same time this excerpt also suggests a refrain of the theme of baby things as both a sedimentation of care-work (this time on the part of the mother who did the washing and ironing); and marker of "respectable motherhood", expressed by sending items onwards in "peak condition". Such evidence of having been well looked after meant these items flowed freely between care assemblages (even as they arguably issued a tacit indictment of the buyer's own care practices as compared to those in the item's previous home). So while evidence of past use can be interpreted as contaminating, it can also be reassuring. In contrast to earlier examples, here we see allowing (well looked after) used items into the home as a marker of a *good* caring practice.

Boundary-maintenance

As these excerpts suggest, engaging in second-hand consumption involves different kinds of boundary-maintenance practices on the part of potential buyers in terms of making determinations about what will be allowed into the home. Regarding the purchase of second-hand baby things, cleansing practices and making determinations about what will and will not be allowed to touch the (pure) body of the baby can be understood as part of a suite of strategies to reduce perceived risk[53]. Although parents at the second-hand sales we studied were largely open to buying baby clothes, as the above passages suggest some buyers viewed certain kinds of matter as too absorbent, "too open" to the world and therefore open to contamination.

Yet, as noted, not all kinds of baby things were marred by this worry about contamination, and the material something was made out of played a role in whether a given item was viewed as potentially contaminating or not. To show the importance of material composition and differential modes of degradation in determinations about whether second-hand children's things flow onwards into subsequent caring assemblages let us turn to consider second-hand

children's books. Like the aforementioned teether with teeth marks in, books also engage with babies' bodies (though hands, yes, but since one of the most important ways babies engage with the world is by exploring things with their mouths, likely also mouths). Yet this did not appear to worry mothers in our study as there were rarely any material traces of such encounters. Indeed books were one of the most common items to purchase second-hand. Not being in the category of things that were "meant" to go in the mouth (even if they had) and absent any visible traces of such engagements, books were not classed in the category of items involved in "intimate" care relations (unlike teats, teethers blankets or beds). Their role in previous care relations was not problematized, and they flowed freely from one caring assemblage to another.

In addition to making determinations about the acceptability of an item for imbrication within a new care assemblage based on the kind of item it was and the kind of traces it evinced about its role in previous care relations, second-cycle buyers also liked evidence that things themselves had been cared for. Like the above-noted textiles which still bore the fragrance of washing-detergent, "looking like it had been cared for" increased an items' chances of flowing onwards from one care network to another. As one buyer told us: "you don't want it (second-hand item) to look battered… you know, you want it to be cared for", while another participant noted liking an item because it "looked like it had not been up in the loft", reflecting a microgeography of British homes in which better-loved matter is allowed to remain in the "main" part of the house and not relegated up to the loft/attic. Together these comments reveal how baby things carry with them not only traces of the care they have given but also of the care they have *received*.

Along similar lines, another participant told us (in relation to items she was considering selling):

> If it had been trashed I wouldn't then feel comfortable selling it on to someone else or giving it to charity. I think you have kind of a responsibility to make sure what you're sending is safe and going to last as long as that child needs it.

This comment suggests the desire on the part of (most) sellers to be a "good" member of the second-cycle community, and further reinforces the role baby things can play as a marker of (good) mothering in the context of the desire to be seen as such by others[54]. In these comments we can see some of the ways baby things function as a sedimentation of a particular set of caring practices (by which they are materially changed); and, in turn, how these objects might come to symbolise those care practices.

Assemblages of "good" mothering

Indeed, sometimes second-hand baby things even had the ability to serve as a marker of the parenting practices in an item's previous home based on the kind of wear they had sustained. Like the items laundered to a higher standard than a participant's own noted earlier, for some participants second-hand baby items provided a window into the caring practices within other families. For instance one mum told us she found having baby things from others "really amazing" because she could—through the traces on a given item-- "learn how (other) people use toys and clothes". In this as in previous comments, we can see how evidence of an items' participation in one set of care relations can create a link to subsequent caring assemblages, and serve as a marker of those caring practices.

And finally, while different kinds of traces elicited different kinds of reactions from potential buyers, sometimes the *lack* of traces could also elicit reactions. If for some an items' cleanliness was a good thing, we also found instances in which the *absence* of traces raised questions for potential buyers. As one participant told us: "there were some items which look better than things here. I felt really bad because they are second-hand and they look like new, they were used by people, they weren't coming straight from manufacturer (sic) and I was feeling bad: what sort of babies do they have that they are keeping their items in so good and well condition!" Here we again see matter serving as a marker of parenting practices, though this time in a different way. While items perceived as too-worn (or which had traces of too-intimate a care relation) were sometimes blocked from becoming part of a subsequent care relation, items that failed to present at least some evidence of their previous caring-work could elicit sadness from second-cycle buyers. These remarks suggest a different kind of haunting, in which an item's lack of marks gives rise to speculation about the home that item had come from, along the lines of "weren't the children allowed to play?", and a concern that the purity of the material was placed above the happiness of the child.

Conclusion

In this paper we extend understanding about the role of the non-human within relations of care through an analysis of baby things. We have argued that matter plays an active role in the work of caregiving, and shown some of the different ways baby things participate in relations of young-child caring: both with matter "caring" for children, and parents (predominantly mothers) caring for matter. In addition to providing comfort and assurance, we have argued that baby things both function as a sedimentation of care practices as well as serving as a marker or metric of those practices.

Baby things come into households from myriad sources, and once their utility in that caring assemblage has ended, go on varied and unpredictable journeys onward. Through an analysis of the circulation of baby things in and out of homes we have explored the kinds of boundary-maintenance labour involved in sustaining care assemblages. We build on the work of Douglas, who argued that "dirt" is socially-constructed, to highlight the ways in which traces of physical and/or affective "dirt" are seen to evince the capabilities of objects to "do" caring. These traces can provide an opening on to speculation about the caring practices of other families, as well as a means to reflect on one's own caring practices. In the variable ways baby things degrade and evince participation in previous care assemblages, these items can elicit a wide range of feelings from those considering their adoption into subsequent relations of young-child care. As baby things move from one family to another they might elicit joy, sadness, curiosity or revolt about the "kind of care" baby things have given within a prior care assemblage. In turn, how that degradation is interpreted can limit or extend care networks, determining whether an object will flow across networks of care or be blocked.

A book, toy or crib might be passed amongst friends and family, strengthening already-existing bonds. Or such items might pass to unknown others (through a charity shop, internet transaction or nearly-new sale) creating a link and sometimes webs of feeling across otherwise-unconnected caring assemblages. Thus this analysis shows how care networks can extend beyond the family unit not only to (waged or unwaged) carework undertaken by known others, but also to matter, as well as to unknown others connected by that matter. We thus suggest that approaching carework from the perspective of the material helps us see these practices in a new light, highlighting the myriad ways care is enacted across human and nonhuman actors and actants as a caring assemblage.

To conclude, this research thus extends existing conceptual work on the more than human by arguing that matter can play an important role within relations of care. This attunement builds on literature that argues for the social and cultural significance of matter as it comes to be intertwined with everyday practices and routines. Already acknowledged to be capable of a performative role in human experiences of emotional support and solace (for example, memorialising links to the past and to distant others), and as a signal of devotion, we have demonstrated the role of the non-human in the active production of care relations as an aspect of social relations more broadly. Finally, building on the work of Baraitser and others who call for greater attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between the human and non-human within parenting, this analysis takes scholarship forward to consider human-non-human practices not as binaries but as a coming-together within assemblages of care.

Moving forward, we are excited to see other scholars beginning to explore the myriad ways understandings of caring might be enriched by attending to the role of the non-human, and hope to see more work in this vein.

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